"Remembering" in Retail Space

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Abstract: The changing face of the High street, dominated by multinational, branded stores has been rapid and aggressive. Against such competition, small independent traders often find it difficult to survive, and many of the older retail trades, practices and spaces have since disappeared.

This paper will explore the tangible and intangible spatial qualities associated with one of the last remaining wool shops in Belfast. Drawing on phenomenological methods of body memory and lived-space it will investigate the everyday context of the interior, which for generations has created a particular focus within the locale, its impact extending beyond its physical presence.

It will be argued that nostalgia for such shops is not purely sentimental, but rather it is a powerful emotion that can 'thrust' us back in time affecting our perception, experience and engagement with space. While it is still a functioning space, this shop presents an opportunity to consider the tacit spatial knowledge embedded in time, through the encounters of everyday life.

Key Words: Memory, Place, Experience, Body, Space

Introduction

As many of the older retail trades, practices and spaces disappear from the local High Street it will be argued that nostalgia for these type of shops, and retailing experience, is not based purely on sentiment but on a deeper sense of memory relating to perception of space and place, past and present. Drawing on phenomenological approaches to space this paper will highlight the tangible and intangible qualities of one of the last remaining wool shops left in Belfast through the practices, stories and encounters of everyday life.

Independent Retailers

> "There is widespread belief therefore, that many small shops will have ceased trading by 2015 with few independent businesses taking their place. Their loss, largely the result of a heavily unbalanced trading environment, will damage the UK socially, economically and environmentally. People (as consumers and members of communities) stand to be disadvantaged the most with restricted choice, entrenched social exclusion and a vulnerable supply chain caused by consolidation."[1]

The demise of the small shop and trader is a concern not just in terms of the loss to personal livelihoods, but also because of what these shops contribute to the emotional and social fabric of our communities. Given the current brutal retail climate affecting all sectors of the market, including long-term major retailers such as 'Woolworth's', the high street is undergoing a dramatic period of change. The House of Commons, All-Party Parliamentary Small Shops Group (APPSSG) report claims that with changing consumer patterns particular areas of retail unlikely to survive in 2015 are: independent grocers, convenience stores and newsagents. According to the New Economics Foundation, many of our existing shopping

areas likely to fall into terminal decline. The diversity of trading spaces that have been the focus off our everyday life will be lost and, they predict, the redundant empty shops could turn many parts of Britain into virtual 'ghost towns'.[2]

Shopping as an activity, process and system has changed considerably in recent times with new genres and formats responding to demands for convenience and easy access both physically and online. The rise and dominance of the major multi-national retailers is reinforced in the local context by their own small stores situated in residential areas. Such is the strength and power of these major traders in the marketplace that many independent retailers often find they cannot compete in terms of price or availability of goods. (Watson and Wells: 2005)

In simple terms, a 'tipping point' comes about when it is no longer profitable for wholesalers to supply independent retailers. (APPSSG: 2006) From a customer's point of view, if a significant number of local shops close down it may not be worth their while or convenient to use the remaining shops, due to the restricted choice. And, once a whole genre of shops selling a particular product disappears, the goods become 'niche' rather than everyday, making them more difficult to obtain, and consequently more expensive to buy. (Boland: 2003)

The New Economics Foundation claim that when older premises are replaced by new branded shops, the local High Street becomes a visual and physical "identikit" of commercial style and culture, which results in a 'growing homogeneity and blandness, where local difference, flavour and colour is erased in the pursuit of uniformity …' (2005: p.10). NEF make it clear that the issue is not about retaining every single old shop to sustain the quaint, the charming and the old-fashioned, qualities and experiences of a slower or traditional lifestyle of the past, but rather to acknowledge where and how the 'diversity' and legacy of independent retailers relates to local community needs and experience. From 'cheapjack shop' (Miller et al, 1998) to fashionable, bijou boutique, across the range of small retailers there is great disparity between the interior/spatial qualities, the perceived merit and class of the actual shopfit, merchandise and target customers. It may be argued that customers, making their own choice, actively avoid certain shops perceived to be run-down, drab and inefficient; their charms well disguised. Even the formal practice of being served, against the anonymity of self-service may feel intrusive, anachronistic and inconvenient in today's society. Miller's (2001) ethnographic study of a 'non-descript' shopping area in decline in North London, reminds us that the presence of neighbourhood shops does not automatically represent a 'hub' for the community. Through oral histories, however, a shop may be remembered more if the trader was known as a sociable character whose personality made the shop a focus of the locality. Yet, this focus can be lost dramatically if there are changes in trader or community mix, the arrival of competitors or re-routing of roads.

Memory, Place and Nostalgia

John Londei's (2007) photographs of old shop interiors evoke a strong sense of mood and a particular spatial quality that comes from long-term occupation. The images may be an authentic representation of the space but are clearly staged in order to create a more sympathetic, visual impact. Subsequent photographs show these places transformed through new occupancy, a blunt reminder that the lifecycle of retail space is typically, limited. Scott observes that it is the fate of all buildings to either 'remain unchanged, to be altered or to be

demolished' (2008: p.1) Buildings may undergo many changes of ownership and re-fits over the course of time and while alteration suggests a degree of modernisation to retain occupancy and create a more useful space, preservation, as Scott points out, 'is unavoidably instilled with the qualities of *fetish*.' (2008: p.11)

Within collective memory, according to de Certeau (1984) even if a building no longer exists it may still be 'remembered' in the community as a 'fragmented legend'; as the place, for example, 'where the bakery used to be'. This may be particularly true if the 'bakery' is perceived to be more memorable than either its replacement. The 'invisible identities of the visible' (1984:p.108) are therefore fixed by the story, in and of, the space. In this respect he claims:

> Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body (p.108)

If the memory of a place as it 'was', can be stronger than the place as it 'is', should this be construed as some sort of nostalgia for the past, or simply a lack of engagement with the space in the present? Casey recognizes the power of nostalgia, to be 'thrust back' to a place and a time in which the remembered event occurs as 'an activity of re-implacing; re-experiencing past places' (1987:p.201). The involuntary, often irrational, emotional attachment to a place can affect objectivity, so that what people feel about a space, may not relate to what people actually see. Nostalgia has been identified as being a positive, self-relevant and social emotion contributing to an enduring meaning in one's life. 'it may facilitate continuity between past and present' (Sedikides et al: 2008) However, Attfield (2000) warns that reliance on memory as a theoretical framework evokes 'pathos and sentimentality'. Nostalgia is also described as ' a desire for a re-presentation of a 'real' past as it was…a return to an original point of departure' (Game :2001, p.230) - suggesting a subjective yearning for the past, as an escape from the present.

Nostalgia is used as a key marketing strategy within many branded stores either by connecting longevity in business to strength of reputation and/or referenced within the overall store design through materials, products and advertising. (Sierra and Mc Quitty: 2007; Holbrook and Schindler: 2003) The interior of old shops, faithfully recreated in folk parks and heritage museums, re-builds the whole walk-in, walk-about, experience. Set in a streetscene, these shops spatially embed the act of shopping in an everyday context, connected to 'home' and locality. This living-history method of interpretation (and experience) normally employs assistants in full costume pretending to inhabit the space surrounded by 'appropriate era-specific' details such scales, cash register and biscuit tins associated with brands and products (*Omo, Sunlight Soap*, *Huntley and Palmers)* no longer widely available. Walsh (1992) refers to such places as an 'environment of nostalgia-arousal' whereby the visitor 'participates and promotes the nostalgia effect' with specific objects triggering recognition and attachment to experiences of the past. Scaled to size, using authentic fixtures and fittings, gas lighting and wooden flooring and ephemera such as advertisements the effect of being in these spaces can create a strong sense of familiarity even for those who did not live in the era. This '*indirect* or *simulated*' nostalgia (Stern: 1992) may be based not on actual memories and experience but rather derived from a healthy imagination inspired by books and films prompted by '*verisimilitude*' - 'the illusion of reality conveyed by faithfully depicted details'

(Stern: 1992,p.16). This suggests that real memory can be confused by external sources, prompted by the tangible (artifacts, counters, advertisements and products) and the multi-sensory intangible (qualities of light and materials smells and sounds) to evoke a memory that creates empathy and positive connection to a space and place. The process of 'remembering' according to Pallasmaa (1996) is holistic and total.

> All experience implies the acts of recollecting, remembering and comparing. An embodied memory has an essential role as the basis of remembering a space or a place. We transport all the cities and towns that we have visited, all the spaces that we have recognized, into the incarnate memory of our body. (p.50)

Casey, however, argues that the only way that such a strong relationship between memory and place can be realised is through the lived body. 'As psycho-physical in status, the lived body puts us in touch with the psychical aspects of remembering and the physical features of place'. (1987: p.189) For a place to be familiar, the body requires a state of 'already having inhabited it', reinforcing Merleau-Ponty's (2002) view that 'our bodies inhabit space and time' It is the actuality of being there as a 'self-moving soul that recollects itself in place'. The body responds by drawing on a memory of past places importing past experience into the present. In short, the lived body remembers past bodily actions, and experiences of place.
Casey states: 'Body memory establishes the familiarity that is requisite to the full realisation of place memory'. (1987:p.193) The past is not separate from the present because it is enacted, or re-enacted through remembered bodily behaviour. In the context of a shop, the bodily memory of place could be enacted in the way we re-inhabit a particular stance in looking at a display, waiting in line to be served, or in the remembered way the body moves in the space in the act of browsing. As Merleau-Ponty observes, 'It is never our objective body that we move, but our phenomenal body'.(2002:p.121) The perception of how far away, or close an object is to the body, how many steps it will take to bring it closer, resonates from the body, remembering and understanding the experience of similar spaces.

"Jean's Wool Shop"

"*Jean's Wool Shop*" has occupied the same premises on the Cregagh Road in Belfast for over forty years. As Jean retired, her daughter Jenny took over the running of shop, retaining the name as a brand and identity. When Jenny speaks about the shop, her customers and knitting, it is as if it all blurs together as one thing. Together, the tangible and intangible, recognized as essential for store image (Kent: 2003) will be used to provide insight into why and how this space works and how it has endured and extended its physical presence in the lives of others.

Knitting used to be an everyday and necessary skill and practice (particularly for women) but more recently it has become something of a specialist hobby and leisure activity. In this respect it has been suggested that small traders have the opportunity to survive if they offer something that would not be viewed as profitable, or cannot be replicated, by major retailers (APPSSG: 2006). However, it could also be argued that if major retailers stocked yarn as a seasonal product it may prompt or renew interest in knitting as a leisure activity, thereby reinvigorating the market.

Figure 1: Cregagh Road, Belfast

The Cregah Road, a main arterial route in East Belfast, is a predominantly protestant working class area. With a recent influx of foreign nationals and young first-time buyers the demographics have changed considerably, with high demand for rental housing. It is known throughout the city as a good shopping area and the pavements are full of people walking from shop to shop, on both sides of the road (fig.1) It is striking just how many people there are on the street. Most people appear to be shopping or walking purposefully either alone (the elderly, with shopping trolleys) or in groups (young mothers pushing prams). According to de Certeau (1984) pedestrian movements through 'intertwined paths' 'give their shape to spaces'. They weave places together' (1984:97). Through their daily routine, shoppers make a link between shops as they go from one to another. Wunderlich (2008) describes how the rhythm of walking engages the body with the environment and is a 'principal mode of perceiving and living (embodying) urban places'. Moving about nurtures and strengthens our sense of belonging and attachment to a place. It also involves the aspect of 'street sociability' engaging, being involved with others, with the chance of 'reciprocal communication'. (Lehtonen et al: 1997) - or not, Miller (2001).

This is a thriving residential area and the streets off the main road are full of well-kept semis and terraces. Built, and re-built at different times over the last century, there is no visible cohesion to the overall look of the area. Some units are purpose built, others have been converted from existing houses. The street is comprised mainly of independent traders, bakeries, estate agents, coffee shops and an eclectic mix of charity shops. Many are family-run businesses with some, such as the flower shops and greengrocers, spilling out into the pavement. The street is lively and active by day. At night, the shops are closed up and shuttered, presenting a blank face to the world, so that the focus then shifts to the brightly lit take-aways that line the route.

'Jean's Wool Shop' is an unprepossessing, Edwardian double-storey red-brick building which stands above the two other adjoining single storey shops (currently a café and estate agent's) and adjacent to a church. It benefits from being located next to traffic lights giving people time to observe the shop as they wait to cross. From the street the shopfront presents a well-ordered arrangement of knitted garments, yarn and patterns. It also permits visibility into and out of the shop, connecting the outside to the inside.

Internally, it is not a very big space and when someone enters they become visibly part of the space. Their presence effects an immediate reciprocal acknowledgement between customer and staff. This can affect how the customer behaves, and whether or not they feel they can be left alone to browse, or if they should approach the staff directly. Two glass-topped counters with tiered drawers are set at right angles to the left of the shop, the shop assistant, stands behind and the customers to the front, so the formal boundaries of those being served, and those serving is clearly understood.

With an all-female staff, and almost exclusively female customers, this is undeniably, a gendered space. Men may accompany their wives to the shop, if it is part of their shopping routine, but for staff, the presence of an unaccompanied male customer is something out of the ordinary, with the expectation of sympathetic assistance.

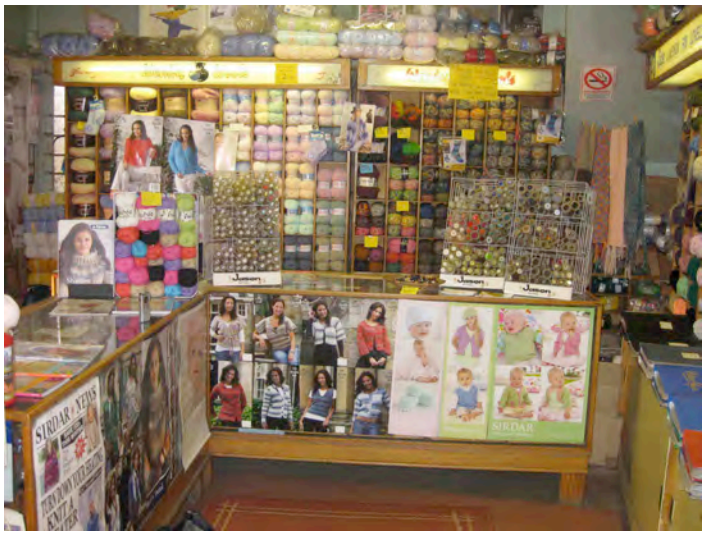

Figure 2: 'Jean's Wool Shop' interior

This is a space that has been occupied, appropriated and inhabited for over forty years. Over that time the interior walls, floor and ceiling have become grubby, worn, layered and aged. This sense of textural permanency however, is barely perceptible because the overwhelming visual effect is of a spectacle of colour and texture that is literally wall-to-wall wool: stacked high on wooden shelving, defining the internal boundaries of the space (fig.2). Casey states 'places are *congealed scenes* for remembered contents; and as such they serve to situate what we remember' (1987: p.189). The fat, soft, textured balls, in different colours, stacked up in packets and in baskets of similar and dissimilar textures contrive to create an overall effect that is cohesive and distinctive (fig.3). As wool stocks change with seasons and trends, the eye is drawn to each 'thing' from the hairy, shiny, furry wool to the vivid and bright to soft, pastel cottons so that the overall impression of the yarn is what people remember about the interior (design) of this space.

Figure 3: Balls of wool

Pallasmaa observes, ' Vision reveals what the touch already knows' (1996, p.29), and adds:

> Our eyes stroke distant surfaces, contours and edges, and the unconscious tactile sensation determines the agreeableness or unpleasantness of the experience. The distant and near are experienced with the same intensity, and they merge into one coherent experience. (p.29-30)

The tactility of all yarn is intimately discovered and experienced. From childhood the memory of the touch, taste, feel and smell of wool is re-lived (chewing on a sleeve, pulling a thread on a jumper). The ball of wool, therefore, does not have to be touched, in order to re-live the contact as a pleasurable (or distasteful) sensory experience.

Figure 4: Yarn and sample display

As knitting is closely linked to events and the family, 'Jean's' witnesses certain rites of passage. Mothers take their pregnant daughters with them to shop for wool to knit for the new baby and younger mothers take their daughters here for their first knitting set. Campbell (1997) argues that shopping as an activity that children learn, defines the female role of housewife, wife, and mother. It is also as much about others as it is about the self (Miller et al: 1998). While the availability of cheaper knitted garments has undoubtedly reduced the necessity of knitting, Lyon and Colquhoun (1999) make the link between nostalgia for the recent past as a leisure resource as having a therapeutic dimension. However, the act of

making something for someone else endows it with meaning and sentiment. Selecting the wool, and pattern, and knitting it in a specific size is an intimate and loving gesture. (fig.4) But for those who love to knit, but have no-one to knit for, '*Jean's* ' facilitates this need to give to others, whereby knitters can drop-off their hand-knit items to be forwarded, through the shop's connections, to a township in Africa. The knitters love to see photographs of their baby blankets, cardigans and hats appreciated and used by others. In this way the 'presence' of the shop is physically extended, not just by selling wool for knitters to knit, but by giving them a purpose and outlet for their need to knit.

Returning emigrants are delighted to discover '*Jean's*' is still there; a fixed landmark from their youth. They are drawn to re-visit the shop to re-live and share their memories and associations with the place. From this space they are able to get their bearings on the changing locale, and to catch up on local news and characters. Casey (1987) presents a strong link between the need to seek out 'old haunts' as a longing to return to 'place' because 'place acts to alleviate anxieties of disorientation and separation'. It is the sense of our own 'loss' of place, that seeks out the comfort of the familiar. 'It is indispensable for knowing what we are (now) in terms of what we were.' (1987: p.215)

Figure 5: Customers and staff

Everyone who works here is an experienced knitter, and the shop is a focus for knitters of all levels of expertise. Customers are keen to share their enthusiasm with like-minded people and novices will get expert advice from both sides of the counter. Miller (2001) observes that the development of networks and regular conversation is important in the promotion of sociality and integration (fig.5). Through the website, the shop fills orders locally and as far away as the US. Many of *'Jeans'* customers are elderly, and some have a routine of visiting the shop every day to buy just one ball of wool. This gives them a reason to leave the house and meet with other people, to create regularity and focus to their lives. Other customers come from much further away because they cannot buy what they want elsewhere. Enthusiastic local knitters are a vital community and meet regularly in church halls and community groups. Truly dedicated knitters say they always have to be doing something with their hands and cannot sit to watch TV without knitting, while others use knitting as a displacement activity when dieting.

This is a space where advertisements of knitting patterns, featuring the faces and torsos of smiling babies, women and girls, are prominently displayed throughout. The visual overload, featuring so many 'happy' people, is strangely comforting and reassuring; a graphic

idiosyncrasy of such shops. Familiar brand names, *Sirdar and Wendy*, alongside new names and new types of wool show that the industry is still vibrant and innovative. The advertising also reflects new styles and colours contrasting with the sweet pinks and blues of traditional and timeless baby-centred nostalgia. And yet, it is often the object-related experiences within the space that prompt body-centred memories: the edge of the counter, buttons associated with school cardigans, or what 'granny' used to wear and handwritten sales notes and signs not normally found in contemporary branded stores. (fig.6) 'Nostalgic bonding', according to Holbrook and Schindler (2003) is heightened from the fact that the viewer's everyday consumption pattern leads to fewer encounters with such spaces and objects. They also noted that it was not an object's 'oldness' or the frequency of a past experience that accounted for nostalgic bonding but rather, that experience-based memories stem from 'life events' leading to powerful emotions, such as: a new experience (being introduced to knitting as a child); some form of perceived accomplishment (knitting to a pattern); love felt towards a significant other (associating knitting with granny) and a perceived comfort and security with a particular place (wool shop).

Figure 6: Counter top

Conclusion

Through our everyday routine we establish patterns of spatial experience. The places we encounter particularly as children, appear to create a heightened memory that promotes nostalgia for places, spaces and things that are no longer part of our life. With the body at the centre of experience, Pallasmaa states that ' Perception, memory and imagination are in constant interaction' (1996: p.47) The lived-body senses and remembers space responding to familiar, or similar spaces it has known, instantly and involuntarily in its movement and behaviour.

With the predicted decline of small independent traders, many of the spaces that we have taken for granted will be lost, or fetishised, or transposed to museums. As we live in a designed world it is important to acknowledge spaces like this wool shop, to gain insight and reflective knowledge from the stories and experience of a space that has, and will continue to endure in the deepest recesses of memory and body-memory.

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[1] APPSSG 2006: p.6

[2] NEF: 2005

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